

PLANNING THE (VIRTUAL) LIBRARY – LEADERSHIP AT THE EDGE OF THE REAL WORLD

Over the last 20 years the virtual library has grown up alongside the traditional physical library. The virtual library has emerged from the multiple threads of the information revolution; ubiquitous network connectivity, growth in bandwidth capacity, the digital shift of resources and services, maturing of web technologies, cloud computing, mobility of computing devices, students living their lives in the always-on and other technological and social factors all of which have made the virtual world a substantive and essential part of the real world. The virtual library is no different.

There has been a long and effective tradition of managing the various interconnected elements of the physical library. The strong management of the physical space and its related resources and services has enabled the physical library to be reshaped and refreshed so as to maintain its relevance to the changing educational and scholarly environment. This can be seen around Australia by the continued investment in repurposing existing library spaces and in the building of substantial new university libraries. Evidence of the success of the strong management of the physical space can be found in the record numbers of students who pass through the gates of the physical library.

However the virtual library, whilst still developing and maturing, is also now a ‘real’ library. Yet the virtual library doesn’t yet have the same strong management tradition. Indeed the management methods that have been so effective with reshaping the physical library need to be re-conceptualised and applied to the management of the virtual library. This re-conceptualisation has been the focus of activity during 2012 at Curtin University Library.

I propose to give an insight into the process and the outcomes of that effort to manage the virtual library. I will share the principles that have been developed to guide the planning and future shaping of the virtual library. I will describe the mechanisms developed to balance strong ownership and leadership of different virtual library elements whilst avoiding fragmentation of the virtual library into silos or paralysis by consultative committee. I will explore the short and long term strategic goals that have emerged from thinking of the virtual library as a real library and not an intangible shadow of the traditional, physical library.

These insights will be of interest to all academic libraries who are grappling with the same issues, and of interest to our academic colleagues who are finding their own feet

in the virtual classroom and virtual laboratory and these insights will be of interest to the IT professionals who provide much of the infrastructure that has made the virtual library a real presence in the academic community. Truly we are all working at the edge of the (real) world.

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